

Somerville May Seek Main Street N.J. Aid State Program Lets Communities Improve Downtowns

Sunday, October 07, 2007

**Seung Min Kim
Staff Writer
Star-Ledger Staff**

SOMERVILLE -- Jef Buehler recognizes that downtown Somerville already boasts several precious assets, such as good core historic buildings and an already active economy.

But the downtown could use more signs, he conceded. And perhaps more parking.

Essentially, the devil is in the details.

People "may not point out what's wrong with the downtown on a detail level, but they'll feel it," Buehler, state coordinator and director of Main Street New Jersey, said recently to a crowd of 60-plus at Alfonso's Family Trattoria.

Somerville is mulling whether to apply for Main Street New Jersey, a program directed through the Department of Community Affairs spanning 25 municipalities that promotes the redevelopment of traditional business districts and downtowns in the Garden State.

The program operates on four main principles: organization, which establishes a core Main Street group to stoke revitalization efforts; economic restructuring, which focuses on using current market conditions to devise long-term economic solutions for downtowns; design, which is geared toward making downtowns aesthetically pleasing; and promotion, which generates ways to market the Main Streets to residents and visitors.

The borough's District Management Corporation -- the group that oversees downtown Somerville revitalization projects -- has gathered information about the program, but Somerville won't officially launch its bid for the Main Street New Jersey designation until Tuesday, when the DMC's board of directors will vote on whether to proceed with the application process. The effort also will need support from the mayor and council.

"We've got a lot of people really invested in the downtown, personally and emotionally," said Cynthia Hollod, executive director of the Somerville DMC.

Admission into the program is competitive, Buehler said. So far, 17 New Jersey towns have expressed interest in getting Main Street New Jersey's help this year, and though the number fluctuates, the state-run initiative has accepted anywhere from two to nine communities during each application process.

This year, the program is gunning for three to six towns, and Buehler said the Main Street New Jersey towns will be chosen by mid-January 2008. The application deadline is Nov. 1.

If Somerville joins the likes of other Main Street New Jersey towns such as Westfield, South Orange and Boonton, that will bolster redevelopment plans already in action throughout the borough, including the addition of commercial, residential and open space on the site of the borough's former landfill.

"Main Street is a vital component for the county seat," said Barry Van Horn, a Somerville fire marshal who has lived in the borough for more than 50 years.

Buehler agrees. Calling a community's downtown its de facto living room, the official cited Trenton as an example of a city where civic value plummeted once the state capitol's downtown evolved from a mixed-use district to an area packed solely with offices.

As families migrated to suburbia, businesses followed suit, eventually leading to the birth of the mall, Buehler argued. And those centers succeeded because malls were able to set hours, choose their tenants, do aggressive marketing, and control the physical environment.

"You can manage the downtown and have these same things," Buehler said.

No money will change hands in the deal, which means Somerville residents and property owners won't pay any extra taxes and the Main Street New Jersey program won't dole out any grants for the county seat.

Money funneled for the effort will come from the DMC's existing budget, which is made up of 8.7 percent of property taxes paid in the borough. This year, the group's budget totaled \$400,000, Hollod said.

The DMC oversees commerce ventures in the designated Special Improvement District, the borders of which include New Street, Veterans Memorial Drive, Park Avenue and High Street and which includes about 300 businesses.

If chosen, Somerville would need to designate an executive director to oversee the progress -- a role that Hollod would assume -- and dedicate at least four years to redeveloping its downtown. Other municipalities have dropped out for reasons that include a lack of funding for the effort or an unwillingness to work with the state, Buehler said.

"This really will be the beginning of everything," said Susan Deutsch, another longtime Somerville resident.